

**Song Exploder**  
**Pharrell Williams - Piece By Piece**  
**Episode 280**

Hrishikesh: You're listening to Song Exploder, where musicians take apart their songs and piece by piece tell the story of how they were made. I'm Hrishikesh Hirway.

*("Piece By Piece" by PHARRELL WILLIAMS)*

Pharrell Williams is—well, let me just say, he's a big reason why Song Exploder exists. He's a singer/songwriter and producer, and in the 90s, when I first heard the work that he was doing with the Neptunes, which was his production duo with Chad Hugo, it blew my mind. It made me want to know where those sounds came from and where those ideas came from. Pharrell has won 13 Grammys. He's been nominated for two Oscars. He's produced iconic songs for Kendrick Lamar, Britney Spears, Clipse, Gwen Stefani, and so many others. And on his own, he's made songs like "Happy," the giant hit for *Despicable Me* that was the best-selling song of 2014. And now, there's a movie about his life called *Piece By Piece*. But it's an animated Lego film. For this episode, I talked to Pharrell about the title song from *Piece By Piece*. So, coming up, you'll hear how Pharrell built that song, including a first draft that never saw the light of day. You'll hear how he built "Piece By Piece" by programming it on his own with MIDI instruments, and then adding and replacing those parts with other musicians, including the high school marching band that he used to play in.

*(Vocals: "(Ah) We never took days off, days off / (Ah) If they hated, now they want to die / (Ah) Finding a brick and where it goes to / We keep stacking high, high, high")*

*(music fades down)*

Pharrell: I'm Pharrell Williams.

*(music fades out)*

I never wanted to do a documentary on my life or, like, my musical career. I just always strayed away from it.

I just don't like listening to myself talk.

I'm an artist, but I'm more so a producer. And I'm much better at helping other people hone their craft than I am the person who enjoys seeing myself on the camera or listening to myself on a recording.

For example, like, I did a song called "Beautiful" with Snoop, 20-something years ago.

*("Beautiful" vocals: "Oh, oh, oh, oh")*

And I'm singing in falsetto on the chorus.

*("Beautiful" vocals cont'd: "Beautiful, I just want you to know / You're my favorite girl")*

Like, a lot of people could like it, but when I was listening to it, I would just hear Mickey Mouse, (imitates Mickey Mouse) 'Cause I sing like this: "Hi kids."  
(chuckles)

You know, I was a very harsh critic on my work, so I didn't want to do a documentary and listen to myself for an hour and change. But it was actually only until my agent was just like being so forceful. He was like: "You gotta make one." And finally, he said the magic words, which were: "You could do it whatever way you want."

And once I heard that, I was like, okay. If it's truly whatever way I want. I wanted it to be animated, and through the guise of Lego.

Hrishikesh: Did you play with Legos when you were a kid?

Pharrell: Yes, that's where this all comes from. My parents would get me those things for Christmas, and it's like, it's a big deal.

And the filter of Lego gave me the space and enough degrees of dissociation where I can, like, look at it objectively.

*(version 1 instrumental fades in)*

"Piece By Piece" started out a completely different song.

*(version 1 vocals: "See, the prey can eat the predator / And the story don't need no editor")*

It's a sweet song.

*(version 1 cont'd: "When you think outside the box")*

It's like, 'yay', you know, 'wee.' But that's all it is. It's sweet.

*(version 1 cont'd: "Starting piece by piece (piece by piece)")*

But I was like, man, this doesn't disrupt the dance floor. It wasn't sticky, and it didn't feel urgent. And I knew that, like, I wanted something urgent for this film. I wanted the verses to just be, like, aggressive. Like a 1977 TransAm. You know, when you hit the gas, it's like (imitates engine revving). Like, like it needs to do that.

I was like, the melody's cool, but this just ain't it.

*(drums)*

So I started from the basic building blocks of what the drums were.

*(cont'd drums)*

And that “boom, boom, boom,” that part right there?

*(“heartbeat” drums)*

That ended up taking on a new life and a new thing as “Piece By Piece.”

*(add clap)*

“Piece By Piece.” (Imitates drums), “Boom, boom, boom.”

I program all of my instruments in Logic.

*(MIDI clavichord)*

That's a clavichord.

But like a fusion of a little wah-wah type guitar vibe

*(MIDI clavichord out)*

And the bassline needed to feel like – you remember this movie called *Drive*, with Ryan Gosling?

Hrishikesh: Yeah?

Pharrell: You know that jacket that he wore?

Hrishikesh: The scorpion jacket?

Pharrell: Yes, the scorpion jacket. I knew it needed to feel like I was putting on that jacket.

*(bass)*

I don't have a word for it. I just know the feeling. The feeling is like that jacket.

*(add clavichord)*

When you hear that, it doesn't sound like the daytime, it sounds like the night, very dark, very nocturnal and it feels like a club scene. And it sounds like you're driving.

*(add drums)*

I knew that, like I wanted to sing the first verse in my lower tone.

*(clavichord fades out, vocals: "I decided long time ago / I would write my own chronicle / Sit around, that ain't me / Nor is following the lead")*

And I layered it like eight times on top of myself.

'Cause I wanted it to be clear and I wanted it to feel like the urgency of an army.

*(instrumental fades out, layered vocals: "Let me build what I see / You know it starts with a piece / Give it time, let it breathe / Instead of suffocating crazy dreams / (Hey)")*

If I'm gonna talk about my life, like, then I need to have a track that sort of encapsulates everything that I am, you know.

I have songs that are, like, very dark and feel very nocturnal, which are the verses of this one. And I have songs that are very bright and feel like the daytime, and that's what the chorus does.

*(add horns and keys, vocals: "And when it pays off, pays off")*

*(cont'd vocals: "(Oh) And when it pays off, pays off / (Oh) It feels so good inside / (Oh) Screaming I told you, I told you / And the only way it happened was mine")*

So, that just sounds like joy to me. (sings) "And when it pays off, pays off..." That feels very bright and very, like, sunshine-y, you know? And I wanted people to feel that. That freedom and release of tension.

I play and program all of my instruments and then I get live musicians to replay 'em. So I got Brent Paschke to replay my guitar.

*(guitar v1)*

And then, I sent him a voice note to be even more detailed, even more forensic about, like, what I wanted the guitar riff to sound like.

*(guitar voice note: Pharrell singing the guitar riff)*

*(guitar v2)*

In the second verse, I take it back and I give you a little bit of context.

I get vulnerable and I sing in a higher octave.

*(vocals: "When it was time")*

"I got butterflies"

*(vocals: "I got butterflies")*

"Don't look surprised, girl"

*(vocals: "Don't look surprised, girl / With a dream this size")*

*(band drum roll into full marching band instrumental)*

That's the Princess Ann Marching Cavaliers. My high school band.

*(marching band out)*

That marching band was such a strong part of my story. I started right after seventh grade, so I was about 12, 13. I've always played percussion and I played um, bass drum. And the bass drum sounds basic, but marching bands have a bass line that has four to five different bass drummers playing in sync. I was a part of that line. And I think it's given me the breadth that it's given me musically, because we were learning overtures and rhapsodies and concertos and all these types of things that, like, the average musician probably didn't have to go through.

So it's like a flex. It's like, yo, I'ma put my high school marching band on this song with me. Because I never dreamt, when I was standing in that drumline, that I'd be given the opportunity to do anything like this. So let's do it.

*(marching band drumline + vocals: "And when it pays off, pays off / It feels so good inside / Screaming I told you, I told you")*

"And when it pays off, pays off, it feels so good inside. Screaming, I told you, I told you, I told you." I was kind of like writing to the fact that it was kind of like a breath of fresh air right at that moment and a release and an exhale, you know. And being metaphorical for like, when you get to that place in your life, too.

*(marching band horns, vocals: "Piece by piece, piece by piece / Piece by piece, piece by piece")*

You know, the anatomy of a song is always interesting, when you see what the urgent and active ingredients are. It's always interesting to see those things, isolate them, put them together, see how they work. The mechanics is like a really interesting thing. And that's zoomed in, right?

But when you zoom all the way out, and go to the macro of it all, I am not thinking as much as I am feeling. The construction of a song is not a thought thing. It's more like sculpture. You're just chiseling away or, or you're adding clay, you know, it's like that.

*(instrumental fades in)*

Music is the skeleton key that's opened every door for me. I'm 51. I love making music. It's not about chart position. It's not about, like, the gamification that the industry places on you that you need to do this and you gotta do that.

Like, yeah, I make music because I love it and it's so fun. And if it ends up being a big record, cool. I went through that in, you know, my twenties, like, oh, you know, it's gotta be this chart topping. I mean, cool, if that's what you want to do.

But I make music because it's fun for me. And there's no pressure in having fun.

*(instrumental out)*

Hrishikesh: Coming up, you'll hear how all of this came together in the final song.

And now, here's "Piece By Piece," by Pharrell Williams, in its entirety.

*("Piece By Piece" by PHARRELL WILLIAMS)*

Visit [songexploder.net/pharrell](http://songexploder.net/pharrell) to learn more. You'll find links to buy or stream "Piece By Piece," and you can watch the trailer for the movie. There's also a song exploder episode about the song "Just," by Run The Jewels, which features guest vocals by Pharrell, and if you want to check that out, there's also a link to that in the show notes.

This episode was produced by Craig Eley, Theo Balcomb, Kathleen Smith, Mary Dolan, and myself. Our production assistant is Tiger Biskup. The episode artwork is by Carlos Lerma, and I made the show's theme music and logo.

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I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.